1-1-1999

Graphic Novels and the Reluctant Reader

Gail de Vos
San Jose State University, gail.devos@gmail.com

Recommended Citation
Gail de Vos. "Graphic Novels and the Reluctant Reader" *Quill & Quire* (1999): 44.

Borrower: RAPID:CSJ

Lending String:

Patron:

Journal Title: Quill and quire

Volume: 44 **Issue:** none
Month/Year: January 1999 **Pages:** not sure

Article Author: Gail de Vos

Article Title: Graphic Novels and the Reluctant Reader

Imprint:

ILL Number: -6177089

Call #:
http://search.proquest.com/publication/30779?accountid=15054

Location: ProQuest Central

ODYSSEY ENABLED

Charge
Maxcost:

Shipping Address:
NEW: Main Library

Fax:
Ariel: 130.65.109.170
Email:

Back to previous page

document 1 of 1

Graphic novels and the reluctant reader

De Vos, Gail. **Quill & Quire** 65. 1 (Jan 1999): 44.

Find a copy

Abstract (summary)

What has happened to influence this change? First, the quality of comic books, particularly graphic novels, is now formally acknowledged. Graphic novels, the sturdy, lengthy comic books that contain one story or a set of related stories, are now being sporadically reviewed in selection journals as well as being the focus of a large number of recent articles. But the most compelling reason is wider awareness of our highly visual culture and its impact on our youth. Far from receiving stories from television and film passively, readers of comic books are actively constructing meaning from the text and illustrations and are sophisticated decoders of this new "language," which is an iconographic narrative. Like well-crafted picture books, comic books are both verbal and visual, a hybrid in which words and illustrations work together to convey meaning. The differences between picture books and graphic novels are not as wide as some think: the work of illustrator Raymond Briggs (author of Father Christmas and The Snowman), for example, is highly regarded in both the worlds of children's literature and comic books.

Full Text

THE MOST frequent lament I hear from teachers is that older students, particularly males, don't read any more. At the same time, however, the most consistent response I get when asking students if they read comic books is a resounding yes. And they read them with great speed and appetite! Steven Weiner, author of 100 Graphic Novels for Public Libraries (Kitchen Sink Press, 1996), estimates that five million people in the U.S. purchase comic books annually: "Teenagers especially identify graphic novels as their preferred reading format." Since many of these teens are considered reluctant readers, I think it's time to reconsider this highly popular, and, in many cases, mentally challenging format.

During the past year I have noticed a different response from many teachers towards comic books and graphic novels in schools. Teachers often used to greet comic books with disdain. Now

when I propose that they use comic books and graphic novels to keep reluctant readers turning pages, I am often applauded - and not only by the students.

What has happened to influence this change? First, the quality of comic books, particularly graphic novels, is now formally acknowledged. Graphic novels, the sturdy, lengthy comic books that contain one story or a set of related stories, are now being sporadically reviewed in selection journals as well as being the focus of a large number of recent articles. But the most compelling reason is wider awareness of our highly visual culture and its impact on our youth. Far from receiving stories from television and film passively, readers of comic books are actively constructing meaning from the text and illustrations and are sophisticated decoders of this new "language," which is an iconographic narrative. Like well-crafted picture books, comic books are both verbal and visual, a hybrid in which words and illustrations work together to convey meaning. The differences between picture books and graphic novels are not as wide as some think: the work of illustrator Raymond Briggs (author of Father Christmas and The Snowman), for example, is highly regarded in both the worlds of children's literature and comic books.

Graphic novels employ a cinematic way of interpreting text that is more appealing than traditional text to this generation of readers who are experienced in interpreting visual images. For students unlikely to sit still long enough to read a short story, let alone a novel, the graphic novel captures their attention for a considerable amount of time. The illustrations draw them into the page but, in order to fully understand the content, they must also decode and internalize the text. Of all the new media, graphic novels may be the closest to that of print.

Many recent publications present quality in both illustrative style and writing. While superhero tales still constitute a large portion of the graphic novels favoured by young males, they are not the only genre available. Non-fiction graphic novels such as the 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner Maus by Art Spiegelman and Keiji Nakazawa's Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima are powerful autobiographical novels about the effects of war. History, music, politics, and science are also explored through this medium although not yet in North America to the same degree as in Japan, Mexico, and Europe, where educational graphic novel texts are available. Quality graphic novel adaptations of opera, Shakespeare, and almost any genre of fiction are now available. Authors Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison have published some of their short science fiction in graphic collections. The Tale of One Bad Rat by Bryan Talbot explores, through the metaphor and reality of Beatrix Potter's life and books, the theme of child abuse, and Trina Robbins' Wonder Woman: The Once and Future Story addresses wife abuse.

Two graphic novel series that should be included in every school library are Jeff Smith's Bone, now available in six compilations in both hardcover and paperback, and Castle Waiting, my favorite comic series of all time. The Castle Waiting series, which has been re-issued with a teacher's guide, begins with The Curse of Brambly Hedge in which author/illustrator Linda Medley tells her story of what happens to Sleeping Beauty's castle after Beauty awakens, marries the prince, and departs to his palace. Both series are in black and white and are filled with refreshing verbal and visual humour that depends on knowledge of a fairly substantial literary background.

Canadian contributors to American comics include John Byrne (Spider Man), Todd McFarlane

(Spawn), Harlan Ellison, Stan Lee, Joe Shuster (co-creator of Superman), Mark Shainblum, and Martin Springett. The best-known and most influential alternative comic today is Dave Sim's Cerebus, which has been published continually since 1977 from Kitchener, Ontario. Cerebus, featuring an aardvark, began as a parody of Conan the Barbarian but evolved into a satire on politics, society, and organized religion. If you want to learn about angle, shot choice, creative use of panels and gutters (from size to frequency), and word balloons, Cerebus is the first comic to study, says D. Aviva Rothschild, author of Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics (Libraries Unlimited, 1995).

Gail de Vos, who teaches at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, is developing an Internet course on comic books and graphic novels for the University of Alberta.

HOW TO CHOOSE GRAPHIC NOVELS

If you're selecting graphic novels or comics for teen readers, ask the following questions:

- Is the book physically well produced and attractive?

- Is the storyline coherent, imaginative, interesting, and well written?

- Is the language accessible and appropriate?

- Do the illustrations provide a subtle commentary on the printed word and move the story forward?

- Are the illustrations of a high standard, both artistically and technically?

- Does the cover illustration do justice to the material inside?

- Are the words and pictures interdependent?

- Does the book treat race, gender, and social class positively?

- Is violence part of the nature of the story or is it gratuitous?

- Is the text legible or is it obscured by illustrative matter, making reading difficult?

Indexing (details)

Subject	Reading; Comic books; Illustration of books, periodicals, etc
Classification	9172: Canada
Title	Graphic novels and the reluctant reader

Author	De Vos, Gail
Publication title	Quill & Quire
Volume	65
Issue	1
Pages	44
Number of pages	0
Publication year	1999
Publication date	Jan 1999
Year	1999
Publisher	Quill and Quire
Place of publication	Toronto
Country of publication	Canada
Journal subject	Publishing And Book Trade
ISSN	00336491
Source type	Trade Journals
Language of publication	English
Document type	PERIODICAL
ProQuest document ID	235593935
Document URL	http://search.proquest.com/docview/235593935?accountid=15054
Copyright	Copyright Quill and Quire Jan 1999
Last updated	2010-06-11
Database	ProQuest Central